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A SERMON

PREACHED BEFORE THE

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE,

JANUARY 30, 1794.

BY EDWARD PEARSON, B.D.

FELLOW OF SIDNEY-SUSSEX COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE.

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TO

THE REVEREND

WILLIAM ELLISTON, D.D.

MASTER OF SIDNEY-SUSSEX COLLEGE,

THIS SERMON

IS,

WITH SENTIMENTS OF RESPECT,

ESTEEM, AND GRATITUDE,

INSCRIBED.

Publiſhed by the ſame Author.

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A

SERMON, &c.

1 KINGS xii. 19.

SO ISRAEL REBELLED AGAINST THE HOUSE OF DAVID.

THE duty of obedience to civil government is ſo evident from reaſon, and ſo expreſſly enjoined by Scripture, that no one, who wiſhes to act in conformity with either, will pretend to diſpute its obligation. With reſpect, however, to the *extent* of the duty, even the beſt diſpoſed may entertain doubts, which can be determined only by referring to firſt principles. Where

duties are of a reciprocal nature, it is neceſſary, that their limits ſhould be marked out, not only that each party may be acquainted with his own, but that he may not make unreaſonable demands on the other; and, though it may be ſufficient, in general, to ſtate the duties of ſubjects, on the ſuppoſition that rulers perform theirs, yet it is uſeful, on ſome occaſions, to conſider the path to be purſued by thoſe, who ſuppoſe themſelves oppreſſed.

It has, indeed, been ſaid, that, to ſecure the quiet of a nation, the belief of the lawfulneſs of reſiſtance to civil authority ſhould have place, only in the minds of thoſe, with whom authority is entruſted *. But as,

* "He (Colville) ſaid, the queſtion about reſiſtance had often been put to him, and he had always declined to anſwer it. But to him (Lord Middleton) he plainly ſaid, he wiſhed that kings and their miniſters would believe

as, in general, from principles which are falſe, no laſting good can ariſe; ſo, in this caſe, it is not to be expected, that men will long admit, without ſatisfactory reaſons, what they have a perpetual temptation to reject. The duties of magiſtrates and of ſubjects, like all others, have limits, beyond which, performance ceaſes to be virtue; and it would be uncharitable to ſuppoſe, that ignorance of theſe has not had a conſiderable ſhare in producing the many revolutions, which the governments of nations have undergone, and which humanity has ſo much reaſon to lament. Revolutions have, indeed, been ſo frequent, that by him, who judges of the future from the paſt, they may, in ſpite of every precaution, be appre-

believe it lawful, and ſo govern as men that expect to be reſiſted; but he wiſhed, that all their ſubjects would believe it to be unlawful, and ſo the world would be at quiet."

Bp. Burnet's Hiſt. of his own Time.

apprehended to recur. Like ſtorms and tempeſts in the natural world, they may, at firſt ſight, ſeem neceſſary to the diſperſion of evils, which would otherwiſe be more extenſively, though more ſilently deſtructive. Let us not, however, be diſcouraged, by ſuch haſty deductions, from doing what may be in our power, and what therefore is our duty. The entire prevention of ſuch diſaſtrous events though difficult, may not be impoſſible; and, in any caſe, they may, by proper care, be rendered leſs ſanguinary, and their recurrence leſs frequent. As there are few governments ſo radically wrong, as not to be capable of *gradual amendment*; ſo, few attempts will be made to ſubvert any, which may not, by prudent meaſures, be defeated. There have been inſtances, in which, when rebellion ſeemed ready to ruſh forth, the voice of wiſdom either appeaſed his fury, or foiled

his

his exertions. Were the machinations of every Catiline encountered by the vigilance of a Cicero, even the exigencies of diſſipation, or the reſtleſſneſs of ambition, though they might ſtill be productive of partial miſchiefs, would not be ſo effectual, as they often have been, in diſſolving all the bonds of ſocial life. And if, as cannot be denied, reſiſtance has ſometimes ariſen from cauſes, on which reaſon has more influence than on theſe, there is good ground to hope, that a previous knowledge of their tendency will go far towards preventing their exiſtence.

If the end of civil government be the happineſs of the people, it will, I think, follow, that the principles, from which the duties both of the ruler and the ſubject ariſe, may juſtly be conceived to be a contract between them, of which protection and obedience are the mutual conditions:

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at leaſt, no objection can be made to the ſuppoſition, on the pretence, that it is too favourable to the claims of the people; for it is impoſſible that, what is the *end* of the inſtitution, can be too much attended to, in the inquiry concerning the means. It muſt not, however, be denied, that the idea of ſuppoſing the duty of obedience to be founded on a contract, has appeared deſerving of reprobation, not only becauſe it favoured encroachments in the people, but alſo becauſe, by the diſtinction, which it is ſuppoſed to eſtabliſh, between changeable and unchangeable laws, it involves a principle, unfavourable to improvements in policy *. Yet does this conſequence alſo reſult, not from the ſuppoſition of a contract, but of a contract loaded with conditions, which, as they are not eſſential to the idea,

* See Mr. Paley's Moral and Political Philoſophy, Book vi. Chap. 3.

idea, ought not to be alledged in oppoſition to its uſefulneſs. It is not neceſſary to ſuppoſe, that the terms of the contract went farther, than a promiſe of protection on the part of the magiſtrate, and of obedience on that of the ſubject. From this ſuppoſition, if I miſtake not, only ſalutary concluſions can be drawn. For, as rulers, with all conceivable imperfections of judgment, muſt ever be far more a "terror to evil, than to good works," they cannot, on this ground, be juſtly reſiſted, but on the evidence of bad intentions*; and, with reſpect to improvements, it will not only be their privilege, but their duty, to make ſuch regulations, as they judge to be of general advantage, with whatever preceding ones they may chance to interfere.

* It is to be obſerved, that I am here ſpeaking of the *legiſlative* authority.

It follows from this, that though, on the ſuppoſition of a contract, reſiſtance to the legiſlature is not altogether unjuſtifiable; yet the caſes muſt be extremely rare, in which it can be defended. For it is farther to be obſerved, that as, in the making of a contract, the conſent of a majority of the people is neceſſary to its confirmation; ſo a queſtion, which reſpects the annulling of it, can juſtly be determined only by a majority. On any principles, which have been maintained by a ſhow of reaſoning, reſiſtance to the legiſlature can be juſtified, only when it evidently appears, that the majority of the people concur in the opinion, that it *ought* to be made; but, if what has now been ſaid be juſt, it cannot, on the principles of morality, be juſtified, unleſs, in the judgment of that majority, the legiſlative authority has been exerted otherwiſe than for the good of the people, the purpoſe

poſe, for which it was originally conferred. In other words; while the legiſlature acts for the public good, the people have no right, on the plea of expedience, to reſiſt its authority, though it ſhould appear to the majority, that a different form of government would be better *. It is only in the caſe, when the legiſlature, in the declared judgement of the majority, has departed from the character of a protector, and aſſumed that of the tyrant and oppreſſor, that it can juſtly be oppoſed.

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* I do not mean to ſay, that the people *never* have a right to attempt an alteration in the form of the legiſlature. If it be aſked, *when* they have that right? I anſwer, at a *general election*. An *expreſs* compact may have any conditions, to which the parties can agree. They have alſo a right, at *any* time, to declare their *ſentiments* on this, as well as on other ſubjects, both by *petitions* to the legiſlature, and by *inſtructions* to their particular repreſentatives. How far, in the preſent ſtate of repreſentation, a member of the legiſlature is bound to follow ſuch inſtructions, partial indications as they muſt be of the public opinion, I do not now inquire.

THE caſe of reſiſtance to the *executive* branch of government, though a different queſtion, will now be of eaſy deciſion. While the ſupreme magiſtrate and his miniſters govern according to the laws, reſiſtance to them, is the ſame as reſiſtance to the legiſlature. When they do *not*, obedience is a duty on no other ground, than that of immediate utility. If, indeed, the encroachments are ſuch, as involve no conſequences of importance to the general welfare, individuals ought to bear much, rather than hazard an interruption of the public peace, or the leſſening of that reverence in others, which is ſo neceſſary to their ready obedience. But, if they are ſuch as materially affect the intereſts of the community, and are ſo extenſively felt and acknowledged, as to afford the probability of a decided ſuperiority, reſiſtance is then as much a duty, as ſubmiſſion is in general. Of this,

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in the proceedings of our happy revolution, an inſtance was exhibited, deſerving the admiration of ages. The ſupreme magiſtrate had, by the moſt indubitable ſigns, evinced a determination to govern, not by the laws, but by his own will; and, though he might poſſibly have in view only the good of his ſubjects; yet, as he was not the appointed judge of that good, and the majority of the people were unwilling that he ſhould be ſo, his encroachments on the legiſlative authority were legally and very juſtly oppoſed.

THE reſult, then, is this: while the legiſlative authority is exerted only for the good of the people, of which nothing leſs than the majority of them can properly be the judges, it cannot be reſiſted, without the crime of rebellion; and, while the ſubject refuſes obedience to nothing, but what is

not required by the legiſlature, he cannot be puniſhed for diſobedience, but by the hand of tyranny. It is, perhaps, impoſſible to lay down rules, by which, in every caſe, the due exertions of power can be diſtinguiſhed from tyranny, and juſtifiable reſiſtance from rebellion. It may, however, be of ſome uſe to conſcientious perſons, eſpecially in times like the preſent, to keep before their eyes a criterion, by which they may be guarded from very groſs deluſions.

But, however exactly the limits of obedience to the legiſlative and executive parts of government may be marked out, doubts may ſtill ariſe reſpecting *where* the legiſlative authority is placed. When oppoſition was firſt made to the Prince, whoſe murder is the occaſion of this day's humiliation, it was not doubted, that implicit obedience was due to the legiſlative authority; it was

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not doubted, that obedience was due to the Prince, ſo long as he was the miniſter of the legiſlature; but it was doubted, whether Charles, under the notion of exerciſing his prerogative, had not gone beyond the bounds of his lawful authority. It was, indeed, a queſtion, about which men, who were both wiſe and virtuous, might have contrary opinions. Whenever, therefore, we contemplate the ſeries of events, of which the one we are now deploring, formed the ſad cataſtrophe, let us beware of being led into uncharitable reflexions. While we reprobate the meaſures, which brought a pious and benevolent monarch to the block, we are not conſtrained to ſanction principles which would leave the conduct of a Hambden, and even of a Falkland without excuſe *.

It

* "Men of the moſt moderate tempers, and the moſt attached to the church and monarchy, exerted themſelves with the utmoſt vigour in the redreſs of grievances, and

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It was the infelicity of the times, that it was not then clearly aſcertained, to *whom*, in many caſes, the right of legiſlation properly belonged; and it is eaſy to conceive, that, in a diſſention between the parts of the legiſlative body, perſons of the moſt upright intentions might enliſt themſelves on either ſide.

We are happily relieved from this uncertainty. There can now be no doubt, where the legiſlative authority is conſtitutionally lodged. It was, indeed, even at the period of the revolution, ſo clear to the people in general, that they roſe, as with one mind, to reſiſt the encroachments, which were attempted; and that event, we may hope, gave a leſſon to our Princes, which will not ſoon

in proſecuting the authors of them. In this liſt of patriot-royaliſts are found the virtuous names of Hyde and Falkland." HUME.

ſoon be forgotten. Hence we may derive a pleaſing aſſurance of our ſafety. While a virtuous King is on the throne, a revolution can ſcarcely be attempted, without the crime of rebellion. Into whatever acts of indiſcretion, therefore, a few individuals may be drawn, it is not likely, that any impreſſions, which need occaſion ſerious alarm, can be made on the bulk of the people.

But though, from the heinouſneſs of its nature, men are greatly abhorrent from the crime of rebellion, yet it is not an *impoſſible* one. Let us, therefore, as a farther ſecurity againſt its commiſſion, conſider how the temptations to it may moſt effectually be removed.

We may reaſonably ſuppoſe it to be the intention of the people, in every ſtage of their

their exiſtence in ſociety, that a power ſhould *ſomewhere* be placed, for preſcribing ſuch rules of conduct, as may beſt promote the public good; and that theſe, when preſcribed, ſhould be religiouſly obſerved: but we cannot, any otherwiſe, than by attending to the progreſs of civilization, determine with *whom*, at any particular period, they would place that power, were it poſſible to conſult them. This makes it the duty of rulers, as they would preſerve the peace of their country, to watch diligently the ever-varying temper of the times, and to concede, with a liberal though not a laviſh hand, ſuch portions of their authority, as can no longer be retained with advantage to the ſtate. A father, during the infancy of his children, finds it neceſſary, in order to their ſafety, to exerciſe over them an authority, which is deſpotiſm itſelf; but, in proportion as they advance in the uſe of

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their underſtandings, he ſlackens the reins of reſtraint; and, when the capacity of ſelf-government is ſuppoſed to be attained, he impoſes his authority no more. In like manner, in the infant ſtate of ſociety, while the members of it, eager in the purſuit of ſelfiſh gratifications, are moſt apt to interfere with the rights of others, there is need, perhaps, of the ſtrong hand of deſpotic power to curb their tendency to mutual injury. As they advance, however, in moral improvement, and become more mindful of the intereſts of others, it ſeems reaſonable, that the conſtituting of the legiſlative authority ſhould be, more and more, the work of the people; and, if the time ſhould, at length, arrive, when all are diſpoſed to pay that regard to the happineſs of their neighbour, which is due, reſtraints from injury being no longer neceſſary, each individual may ſafely be permitted, in moſt things, to legiſlate for himſelf.

In the portion of ſacred hiſtory, to which I have invited your attention in the text, there is no one, however he may condemn the conſequent proceedings of the people, who will not acknowledge, that the conduct of Rehoboam was reprehenſible. He ought to have conſidered, that, in proportion as a long reign of proſperity and peace had afforded to the people opportunities of improvement, it had incited aſpirations after liberty, and increaſed their impatience under arbitrary reſtrictions. But, when we advert to the character of his counſellors, we need not wonder at his deciſions. In liſtening to the advice of thoſe, who, from their inexperience, were unable to diſcover a truth, which depended ſo much on obſervation, and indiſpoſed, by their habits, to declare it, if unwelcome, he ſufficiently manifeſted, that he was a fit inſtrument for accompliſhing, what providence had ordained *, the

* 1 Kings xii. 15.

the diſmemberment of his kingdom. And, though I would not repreſent the caſes of Charles and Rehoboam as perfectly parallel, there is, it muſt be admitted, a reſemblance between them, which cannot but be remarked. Had due allowance been made for the diffuſion of political knowledge, which the rapid progreſs in literature and civilization, during the reigns of Elizabeth and James had occaſioned, it would doubtleſs have been ſeen, that, as the people were become competent, ſo they had a reaſonable claim, to a more extended ſhare in the formation of the laws, by which their conduct was to be regulated. It would not have happened, that a Prince, truly deſirous of the welfare of his ſubjects, ſo fatally failed of accompliſhing his purpoſe. He would not, by too ſtrict an adherence to precedents, have provoked an oppoſition, which, though extended, in the event, to rebellion,

was not, at its commencement, indefenſible; or, having provoked it, would not have omitted to learn, from ſo plain an indication of the temper of the times, the expedience of conceding to the people thoſe rights, which they afterwards ſo dearly purchaſed.

On the other hand, it is to be remembered, that the faults and miſtakes of rulers will neither excuſe thoſe of their ſubjects, nor alleviate the miſeries, which muſt neceſſarily reſult from them. They who, in their zeal for freedom, revolt from a Rehoboam, or a Charles, will make no enviable exchange, by ſubjecting themſelves to a Jeroboam or a Cromwell. Rehoboam, indeed, by the haughtineſs of his demeanour, had offended his people, and given them ſome grounds of apprehenſion; but his rebellious ſucceſſor in authority, by the influence of a wicked

wicked example, proved the cauſe of their deſtruction. " Jeroboam drave Iſrael from following the Lord, and made them ſin a great ſin. For the children of Iſrael walked in all the ſins of Jeroboam, which he did; they departed not from them; until the Lord removed Iſrael out of his ſight, as he had ſaid by all his ſervants the prophets." And, though the ſubjects of Charles had reaſon to believe, that their liberties were not ſufficiently ſecure, and might eventually be wreſted from them; yet their oppreſſions were chiefly in idea: but, no ſooner had they let looſe the demon of rebellion, than evils, far worſe than thoſe they had apprehended, faſt multiplied around them; and, while they ſought to ſhun the poſſible dangers of deſpotiſm, they placed themſelves beneath the uplifted rod of a tyrant. It is, therefore, the part of the patriot, as he would prove himſelf worthy of his name,

to

to take care, not only that the end, at which he aims, be good, but that the means, by which it is to be attempted, be juſt, and likely to be ſubſervient to his purpoſe. He, who is diſpoſed to pay due attention to conſequences, will rather leave a ſcheme of probable utility unaccompliſhed, than call to his aſſiſtance a power, which he is unable to control. When the popular tide ſets ſtrong in any direction, there is juſt cauſe to apprehend, that it will proceed beyond the bounds, which true policy would preſcribe; and, though it may be the wiſdom of thoſe in authority, to diſarm attempts at undue encroachment, by compliance with reaſonable demands; yet it is the duty of individuals, in their private characters, to take a bias towards the contrary ſide. The ſame end would thus be promoted by both. The waves, which would be rendered more boiſterous, by the reſiſtance of the object aſſailed,

aſſailed, will be ſtilled into ſerenity, by an oppoſition, which originated among themſelves. Even where the cauſes of complaint are juſt, yet, when complaints are in faſhion, the true patriot will act more conſiſtently with his profeſſions, to check them for a ſeaſon, rather than, by adding his reſpectable ſanction to what has a natural tendency to exceſs, riſk the hazard of inflaming diſcontents, and of finding, at laſt, to his ſurprize, "that the authority, which was ſufficient to excite to inſurrection, is too weak to reſtrain the enormities, with which it is attended *."

But we are not to expect, that the duties of either party will be obſerved, without conſiderable failures. Each, therefore, ſhould be prepared to make that allowance, for which both, by turns, will have occaſion. It is, in general, a ſource of much diſſatisfaction,

* Hume.

faction, which can be avoided only by correcting our expectations, to demand a complete diſcharge of duty in others, while we attain to but an imperfect one in ourſelves. Generoſity is the acknowledged duty of the rich. The poor, therefore, are too apt to imagine, that a rich man, if, in any inſtance, he is deficient in generoſity, has no claim on their gratitude, how much ſoever, on the whole, they may have been the objects of his bounty; and it is well, if they think he has fulfilled his duty, in this reſpect, while he has any thing left to beſtow. Gratitude, on the other hand, is the duty of the poor. The rich, therefore, are too apt to think, that a poor man is ſeldom ſo thankful as he ought to be; and, if any ſentiment ſhould appear, which is inconſiſtent with their idea of his obligations, he is quickly regarded as unworthy of their bounty. Neither party ſeems ſufficiently to

ſider the difference, between conceiving the idea of a duty, and actually diſcharging it. There may be difficulties in the diſcharge, for which it is not eaſy to make juſt allowance. The rich man has perpetual ſtruggles, felt only by himſelf, between the ſenſe of his obligation to perform his duty, by relieving the indigent, and the deſire to be diſtinguiſhed in his claſs, by the increaſe of his poſſeſſions: and the poor man has fears, of which the rich can have no adequate idea, leſt, while he is acknowledging the bounty of his benefactor, he may confeſs ~~his~~ a dependence on another, which will degrade him from the character of a man. In the diſcharge of political duties, there is, at leaſt, as much need of this allowance, as in that of any others. Let, then, each party, in judging the proceedings of the other, be directed by the candour, which the difficulty of the ſituation, or the im-

portance of the matter at ſtake, may juſtly claim. Though there ſhould be a too great tenaciouſneſs of prerogative, yet let it be remembered, that it may ariſe from apprehenſions, not altogether unfounded, that eaſineſs of conceſſion will invite unreaſonable demands: and, though the people may be too clamorous in the cauſe of liberty, yet it ſhould never be forgotten, that, what has been obtained by the blood of their anceſtors, can ſcarce be too highly valued, or too anxiouſly preſerved.

Above all, ſince it is of more conſequence to ſecure the performance of duties, than to detect the delinquents, who have neglected them, it is incumbent on every one, to be chiefly attentive to the diſcharge of his own. With this view, rather than with that of increaſing the ability to find fault, let the ſubject of this day's ſolemnity

be

be conſidered. There are few, who may not find in it reaſons both of thankfulneſs and caution. As, from what was right in the conduct of each party, we derive many advantages of our preſent ſtate; ſo, from the errors of each, we may learn a leſſon of wiſdom. While rulers contemplate with grateful reſpect, the fortitude, with which oppoſition, even unto blood, was ſo heroically made againſt encroachments, incompatible with the effectual exertion of authority; they ſhould be awakened, by the melancholy iſſue, to a ſenſe of the danger in too long perſiſting to refuſe conceſſions, which may be reaſonable and neceſſary. While ſubjects admire, and are thankful for, the patriotiſm of a Hambden, in his ſtand againſt overſtretched authority; they ſhould be aware, that, like him, they may eaſily be led, by the acceſſion of principles leſs pure, to oppoſe with intemperance,

and, at length, become the inſtruments of ambition, contribute to overthrow, what they ſet out with an intention to defend.

If the principles, which I have ſtated, be juſt, we may draw from them the comfortable concluſion, that, in the defence of our preſent conſtitution, notwithſtanding any imperfections, which may poſſibly exiſt in it, the co-operation of the wiſe and good may reaſonably be expected. For, whoever conſiders it with candour and diſcernment, muſt acknowledge, that, on thoſe principles, no oppoſition to it can be juſtified. It will not by any be denied, that we are governed by laws, which are admirably adapted to promote the public good. In all material inſtances, they are adminiſtered with an even and equal hand; ſo that our courts of judicature, in the accuracy of their inquiries, and the uprightneſs of their deciſions,

ciſions, are the wonder and envy of the world. And though, from the mode, in which the legiſlative body is conſtituted, there is not, perhaps, all the ſecurity we might wiſh, nor probably all which, at a proper ſeaſon, we ſhall obtain, that none but beneficial laws will be made hereafter; yet, in fact, there is but little room for apprehenſion: our legiſlature is, indeed, neither infallible nor impeccable, but it is not very likely, that any one, *however* conſtituted, would poſſeſs a ſhare materially greater, either of wiſdom or integrity.

Now, to God, &c.